

NEWS FOCUS

Playing Politics With Foreign Intelligence

By Cord Meyer

WASHINGTON — The Republican National Committee has fired the opening gun in a campaign to make the Carter administration's handling of foreign intelligence a major issue in the election, but the scattershot blast was wide of the mark.

Last week, GOP Chairman William Brock issued the report of his subcommittee on intelligence. It called for a non-partisan approach and then lambasted the Democrats for causing all the ills that have befallen the intelligence community without mentioning Richard Nixon's destructive role in trying to involve the CIA in Watergate.

The Republican study, however, is essentially right on two general points. In a time of growing Soviet military strength, the United States is more dependent on accurate foreign intelligence than ever before. In the face of this need, it is also true, as the report charges, that morale at the CIA is dangerously low.

Just how low is revealed by the fact that senior CIA officials fear a mass exodus of competent officers at year's end when they become eligible for higher retirement pay. About 200 are retiring this summer, and this loss of vital skills is expected to become a flood. Resentment against CIA Director Stansfield Turner's style of management has reached the point where one senior officer has refused to accept the agency's highest decoration from the admiral. Turner's deputy, Frank Carlucci, had to preside at the award ceremony.

BUT WHEN IT DEALS with specific institutional reforms, the GOP report goes off the track. Downgrading the role of the director of central intelligence, it proposes the creation of a chief intelligence adviser on the White House staff. This czar would defend the intelligence budget before Congress and act as the president's eyes and ears in controlling the intelligence agencies.

Aside from the fact that the top White House staff has not been notable in recent years for its apolitical objectivity, there is the disadvantage that such an intelligence czar would be cut off from day-to-day contact with the CIA's analysts and operators and would lose his grasp of essential detail.

As former CIA Director Richard Helms remarked, "To separate the president's principal intelligence adviser from his control of the CIA is like removing the head from the body. A disembodied intelligence adviser cannot compete with the other claimants for the president's

ordinating his successor to a political appointee.

Even less helpful is the Republican proposal for dismembering the CIA by removing the clandestine service, the Operations Directorate, from the agency and establishing it as a separate "Foreign Operations Service." The GOP study would solve the cover problem by requiring all government agencies to provide official cover overseas to the intelligence operators, but where would their Washington headquarters be located, if not within the CIA? In the words of one congressional staffer, "We would really be dead in the water if we went down that road."

THE EFFECT OF this partisan initiative is to reduce to the vanishing point any chance of adoption of a new legal charter for the CIA in this session of Congress. Contrary to the implication in the GOP report, long negotiation between the Carter administration and both Republicans and Democrats on the Senate Intelligence Committee has led to a much improved version of the excessively restrictive legislation introduced last year.

This CIA charter will be introduced next month, and the intelligence agencies believe they can do their work effectively within new legal limits that protect the rights of private American citizens.

By politicizing this issue, the Republican National Committee has postponed legal reform until after the election. There would be no great damage done by this delay except for the fact that the world does not stop to wait for American elections.

In Central America, time is running out. Even Latin leaders who supported the more moderate wing of the Sandinistas now fear a covert Cuban takeover of the Nicaraguan revolution and its spread to El Salvador. In a bitter, recent confrontation, the left-leaning Panamanian leader, Omar Torrijos, accused Castro of infiltrating Cuban political agents to seize power.

Under present law, the Carter administration must inform eight congressional committees before it can provide discreet assistance to democratic moderates trying to resist the Cuban offensive. When so many have to be informed, the danger of leaks is so great that Carter officials, with good reason, hesitate to take action that requires secrecy.

The United States will have one hand tied behind its back until congressional oversight is limited to the House and Senate Intelligence Committees. But that legal change is now unlikely in the brief time that remains to turn the

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